

# Pelene Sri Vajiragnana Mahanayaka Thera

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

He was indeed a unique personality in the history of the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. He was unique in his grasp of the profound teachings of the dhamma and unique, without a parallel, in the manner in which he gave expression to it in his delivery of sermons to his listeners. He never hesitated to question the authenticity of what was delivered to him via tradition, from where it came and who was presently handling it. His departure from our midst was more than half a century ago and it is a lament that few feel the need today to remember him.

Why do people need to remember such personalities. It may be that he was a worthy grand parent of somebody or an uncle as a blood relation. A grand teacher of some descendent pupil, possibly not so grand, living today. Or a very closely associated friend of yet another, monk or layman, who still has sparkling reminiscences of the good old times. But well and truly, how many of them are good enough and courageous enough today to convey the message of what he lived up for ?

While he was yet a young student at the Maligakanda Pirivena in Maradana, a leading Buddhist College at the time for the Sangha, some of his teachers are said to have ungrudgingly remarked, on hearing his delivery of dhamma sermons, that young Vajiragnana had a *pelene* [a distinct plan or pattern] of his own. This remarkably generous comment, well worthy of his teachers of the day, is a reflection of his personality and his unique wisdom. I am indeed lucky to have seen proof of it myself. As a young student of the then University College in the year 1941, I had the good fortune of sitting on a mat in his presence in the evening, on many days of the week, on my way back home

after lectures.

He would talk to me on a very wide range of subjects, starting with subtleties of the dhamma and then gradually moving over to many areas of ill-grasped notions about the Buddhist religious life in which the average lay men and women were then pitifully getting caught up. Mind you this was more than sixty years ago. But very few people are aware that this is taking place today, more speedily, efficiently and extensively, very much more in the midst of believed-to-be intellectually elitist circles, aided and abetted by many of the media personalities, over the television, radio and the news papers.

The Mahanayaka Thera upheld that correcting these erratic life styles of our lay community into which they quite often slip was the bounden duty of the Buddhist monk, if they were available and competent enough to do it. The Vajiraramaya of Bambalapitiya at the time, with venerables like Madihe Pannasiha [latterly the Maha Nayaka Thera], Narada Maha Thera, and Piyadassi Maha Thera did serve this function to a very great extent. The Palene Mahanayaka Thera always insisted that our Buddhist monks of this country needed both depth of knowledge of the dhamma as well as courage of their convictions to adequately to meet this demand and elucidate vital issues of the dhamma and the social philosophy [which meant the art of decent good living in the world] of Buddhism to our lay community. In this, I know that he fully well believed, lies something more than personal gain and glory for the monk.

Around that time, merit-making in various areas of Buddhist religious activities around the temple had become the prime motivation of the Buddhists. Personal character reform of men, women and children of our Buddhist community via *sīla* was apparently receding to the background. Professional ethics in the lives of our lay community, what men and women in public life should do and should not do, were being neglected. Monks did not feel competent enough to handle them. We were apparently driven in this direction by our own deflected religious traditions which were un-obstrusively creeping into

our midst. Day-time only *sila-vyaparas* [i.e. half-day only], were becoming the order of the day. This has now, without any body, monk or layman, ever feeling the pinch, permanently come to stay.

We often deliberated over the lamentable lack of knowledge on this area, in this country, in the hands of both our monks and our lay community. The obvious result of this was a disastrous vacuum in the area of social awareness in Buddhist thinking. Nobody ever realized the degeneracy into which we were daily sinking, both in the home and society. Preachers of today have turned out to be tomb-stone painters, covering up life-time sins of men and women. Over every scandalous crime, we can today put a new poster. Gauge for your self where we stand, both with regard to the moral stench and criminal brutalities in our midst, just at our door steps. Neros in our midst are fiddling somewhere, while Rome is burning.

At times like these, Palene Maha Nayaka Thera was persistently incisive and challenging. We remember and recollect with pride and jubilation. Make no stupid prayers for his return. We miss him today. We miss him dearly.